

Furniture Cleaning and Care

Vocabulary:

Conservation:

The preservation of cultural property by way of examination, documentation, treatment, and preventive care, informed and supported by research and education. Executed using reversible techniques and materials.

Restoration:

Treatment procedures intended to return cultural property to a known or assumed state, often through the addition of non-original material.

Refinish:

Removal of old finish to substrate, preparation of the substrate, and an application of a new finish.

Patina:

Accumulations of finish, wax, and soil over time. A desirable presence and appearance for Collectors and Curators.

Dust:

A hydrosopic slurry of airborne, organic and inorganic particles. May include: sulfur, carbon, skin, lint, and hair.

HEPA:

“High Efficiency Particulate Air.” Usually in reference to filtration systems for environmental control or vacuums.

Decorative Arts Bibliography:

Greene, Jeffrey P. *American Furniture of the 18th Century*. Newtown, Ct.: Taunton Press, 1996.

Krill, Rosemary Troy. *Early American Decorative Arts, 1620-1860: A Handbook for Interpreters*. Walnut Creek: Altamira Press, 2001.

Penn, Theodore Zuk. “Decorative and Protective Finishes, 1750-1850: Materials, Process, and Craft.” *Association for Preservation Technology* 16, 1 (1984). 3-46.

Furniture Care:

Tools:

- Petroleum-free nitrile gloves – www.labsafety.com, www.safewareinc.com
- Cotton cloths – home improvement stores
- Synthetic cloths, “Pel cloth” and “Preserve-It” – www.universityproducts.com
- Brushes, “Hake” or “Windsor-Newton” brushes – art supply stores, www.universityproducts.com
- Distilled water – Grocery stores
- Liquefied hide glue, “Titebond Liquid Hide Glue,” “Old Brown Glue” – www.titebone.com, www.oldbrown glue.com
- Cotton swab, balls, or wool – grocery and pharmacy stores, www.gaylord.com

- Brush cleaner, “The Master’s” – www.universityproducts.com
- Paste or butchers wax, “Butchers,” “Johnson,” “Goddard’s,” and “Trewax,” – www.talasonline.com, www.bwccompany.com, www.homedepot.com, www.acehardware.com

Environment:

- Place objects in dry areas away from natural or artificial forced air such as windows or heating, ventilation, and air conditioning (HVAC) vents.
- Maintain a stable climate year-round, avoiding fluctuations of more than 10 degrees (for temperature) or 20 percentage points (for relative humidity). Humidity should be kept between 40 and 60% and temperatures between 65 and 73 degrees are reasonable in a home environment.
- Keep objects out of direct sunlight and reasonably distant from hot artificial lights, especially those with ultraviolet (UV).
- If possible, track and regulate light exposure. Ex: The Winterthur Museum annual light exposure average for moderately sensitive organic materials should not exceed 730,000 LH (lux hours), which equals 200 lux for 10 hours a day, 365 days a year.
- Change HVAC air filters regularly to reduce dust.
- When not in use cover furniture with a clean cotton sheet or another stable barrier to light, dust, dirt, and debris.

Furniture handling and movement:

- Wash your hands and dry them thoroughly. Wear petroleum-free nitrile gloves if the surface is painted or gilded.
- When moving pieces, first separate any removable parts and secure doors. Grasp and lift them by their base, keeping them upright. Any pieces larger than a chair should be moved by two or more people.
- Avoid dragging or sliding furniture.

Furniture dusting:

- Dust regularly.
- Vacuum area often using a HEPA filter equipped vacuum and fresh dust bag.
- Check condition of surface. Do not dust if the surface is brittle, cracked, flaking, raised, or splintered.
- Vacuum: First dust with a clean brush attachment or a combination of a hose and brush. Swipe along the grain of the wood towards the nozzle.
- Cloth dusting: Dust with a clean cotton or micro-fiber cloth, changing surfaces as it soils with each pass with the grain. Optimally with a dry cloth, dampen the cloth if in a dry environment.

Furniture cleaning:

- Clean on an as needed basis.
- Check condition of surface. Do not clean if the surface is not a clear-finish, and especially if the surface is brittle, cracked, flaking, raised, or splintered. Additionally avoid cleaning painted, gilded, extensively inlaid, and unfinished furniture. Also, determine if the soiling is actually detrimental or simply the patina. Consult a Curator or Conservator if undetermined.

- Dust the object. See *Furniture dusting*.
- Wipe a clean cotton cloth, well-wrung with warm distilled water, lightly across the surface with the grain. Dry by wiping a third, dry cloth across the surface.
- If furniture is waxed, reapply paste wax as suggested in *Conserve O Gram 7/2* or *The Winterthur Guide to Caring for your Collections*. Note: Paste wax may be reversible, but its application will create a polish that may not be period appropriate. Consult a Curator or Conservator if unsure.

Furniture polishing:

- Polish infrequently.
- Check condition of the surface. Only polish clear-finishes that are stable and fully intact.
- Paste-waxed objects can be re-polished by rubbing the wax-coated surface in a circular motion and along the grain. Polishing of existing wax layers may be undertaken as the surface is touched or worn.
- Note: Reapply paste waxes to objects as needed, usually every one to four years. See *Furniture cleaning*.
- *Less* product means *more* life for antique furniture.

Furniture repair:

- Minor, superficial repairs may be addressed by the owner.
- Loose (but intact) joints, cleanly displaced veneer or small, non-structural elements can be tightened or reapplied with a sparing application of liquefied hide glue. Consult a Conservator and/or the “Furniture: Broken or Loose Pieces” section in *The Winterthur Guide to Caring for Your Collection* for further instruction.
- Structural and stability issues should be addressed by a professional.

Guidelines for conservation consult:

- Objects with original features and finish, artist, historical, or monetary importance.
- Anything more than a minor separation of an applied element (veneer, inlay, carved embellishment, or block) on a small scale. Structurally compromised objects.
- Identification or verification of surface condition or treatment.
- See the City of Bowie Museums *Conservation Guidelines* for more information.

Furniture Care Bibliography:

Eckman, Inge-Lise, ed. *Caring for your Family Treasures, Heritage Preservation*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 2000.

Landrey, Gregory, et al. *The Winterthur Guide to Caring for Your Collections*. Winterthur, DE: Henry Francis du Pont Winterthur Museum, 2009.

McGiffen, Robert F. Jr. *Furniture Care and Conservation*. Nashville: American Association for State and Local History, 1983.

National Park Service. *Conserve O Grams*.

http://www.nps.gov/museum/publications/consveogram/cons_toc.html#collectionpreservation

- Levitan, Alan. "Dusting Wood Objects." 7/5 (September 2002): 1-5.
Sheetz, Ron. "Cleaning Wood Furniture." 7/1 (July 1993): 1-2.
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_____. "Silicone in Furniture Waxes and Polishes." 7/6 (July 1993): 1-2.

National Trust. *Manual of Housekeeping: The care of collections in historic houses open to the public*. New York: Butterworth-Heinemann, 2006.

Rivers, Shane and Nick Umney. *Conservation of Furniture*. London: Butterworth-Heinemann, 2003.

Smithsonian Museum Conservation Institute. *Taking Care: Furniture & Wooden Objects*.

http://www.si.edu/mci/english/learn_more/taking_care/index.html

"Furniture Care and Handling."

Wachowiak, Melvin J. Jr. "Moving, Packing, and Shipping Furniture."

Williams, Donald C. "Preserving and Restoring Furniture Coatings (July 2003).

Williams, Don and Louisa Jagger. *Saving Stuff: How to Care for and Preserve Your Collectibles, Heirlooms, and Other Prized Possessions*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2005.

General Conservation Websites:

The Canadian Conservation Institute: www.cci-icc.gc

The American Institute for Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works: www.aic-faic.org

American Institute for Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works: www.conservation-us.org

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